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## THE PLAGUE OF PERSONALITY<sup>1</sup>

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Imagine a scene on a railway train running out of Edinburgh. A Scotchman and an American are reading the papers. Columns are full of details of a strike of transportation employees in London. There is a little item to the effect that the king yesterday shot 196 brace of partridges. The American remarks, "The king is enjoying himself. What a useful guardian of his people!"

The Scotchman, argumentative as usual, retorts, "What good would he be in a railway strike?" The American replies, "What good is he anyway?"

"Sir," replied the Scotchman, "do you forget that in British Africa there are millions of souls, most of them uncivilized? In British India there are hundreds of millions of people, in the other colonial possessions there are hordes of semibarbarous races, all necessary to the prosperity of the empire. Their only conception of government is the will of a personal ruler. The oriental nations in arrested development must have an objective head; they haven't the mentality to conceive of abstract common interest, they've got to have personality."

One sometimes wonders whether the administrative processes of educational systems belong to conditions such as that Scotchman cited to show the need of a personal king. One sometimes wonders whether the continuance of the prevailing habit of school government promises to perpetuate a condition among those subject to it that makes them incapable of what is deemed efficient service unless they are governed by the sort of personality that is necessary to control living beings who do not guide themselves.

If the purpose of public schools is to produce for the republic a body of self-directing citizens; if there is in schoolmasters any per-

<sup>1</sup>Address delivered at the meeting of Harvard Teachers' Association, Cambridge, Massachusetts, March 7, 1914.

sistence of monarchy which tends to make them prefer to direct schools rather than to train schools toward self-direction, will it be appropriate to call such a tendency an affliction? It is that trait of the schoolmaster's character I should like to discuss. It is that nuisance in his make-up that I mean by the plague of personality. I am asking you to consider that portion of his ego that is damaging, pestiferous, and preventive of hale growth of the service he is engaged in. The characteristics of this personality we may read summed up in a bright and witty, but also depressing, little book by Mr. C. W. Bardeen, of Syracuse, New York, entitled *Teaching as a Business*.

If you are interested in knowing how general the opinion is that a typical schoolmaster develops in himself objectionable features of personality, try the experiment of noting the reaction upon your intelligent friends not in this calling when you test them like this: say to one of these acquaintances after another, "If you should hear of Lawyer Thompson or Dr. Smith or Merchant Brown the remark, 'He is a regular schoolmaster,' would your opinion be favorable or unfavorable?"

Try also upon them this: "If you should hear, regarding Lawyer Thompson or Dr. Smith or Merchant Brown, the remark, 'He is a regular engineer,' would your opinion be favorable or unfavorable?"

It happens that the school with which I am connected occupies a new building which brings to it many visitors from out of town, among them members of boards of education in various cities. I have been trying upon them these questions: "How long have you been a member of the board? Is your opinion, now that you have become more familiar with the school man, more favorable or less favorable than before you went upon the board of education?" I haven't found any board-member yet who answers "more favorable." The part of our personality that is responsible for this general contempt is the subject of my inquiry today. There are societies to rescue drunkards, to save sinners, to cure consumptives. This association might do a great service in defending schools from their principals and systems from their superintendents. Let us try some prescriptions.

*The cure of oracularism.*—We can possibly cure ourselves of giving a conclusive opinion on every subject by bearing in mind that there is no proved science of our business; what it needs more than anything else just now is experimenters and provers rather than teachers who follow a law laid down by us. When a superintendent finds himself tilting back in his chair and talking to a teacher instead of listening to one, the angle of the chair, like the position of a railway semaphore, is a danger signal. It means, "Be careful; you're going to oracularize in a moment; don't do it." A man teacher comes in and says, "What method would you suggest by which the music stands could be taken to the steamer?" Be careful. The music stands fold up into a space about two feet long by one inch in diameter. The music-master and the players in the orchestra are going from the school building to the excursion boat. Don't be led into doing a music-master's thinking for him. Because, for every reduction of thinking by teachers brought about by you the danger threatens that by-and-by the place will have only one thinker in it. Superior though the head man may know himself to be in thinking power, it will rarely happen that the sum of his thinking will exceed the sum of the thinking of the entire staff. But it is the tendency of a school to go on the assumption that the machinery of thought is all in one big head.

The teacher, in trouble, especially the lady teacher, tends to make a monarch of a head master. A tradition obtains that discipline is to be separated from teaching and that the master should do the disciplining for teachers in order that they may be free to teach. If the master really knows a scientific and efficient way to train the conduct of children he should not monopolize it. Let him ask advice of the teachers as to general practices of discipline to see whether he may not find an improvement upon his own ideas. When the disciplinary difficulty arises, do you think he ought to take the case out of the hands of the teacher? Or might he say, "How are you going to treat this case?" There may be danger in cases of discipline that the head master will become oracular.

They say of one superintendent that the solemnity with which he declares that twice two is four is surpassed only by the pompous

certainty with which he proclaims that twice two is five. Education used to belong to the church. Therefore its proclamations were eternal verities formed by divine power in the soul of a master, not worked out by trial, examination, and comparison. It is more enjoyable to be free of the thralldom of fact and of proof than to admit that one doesn't know. All the preachers I sat under in my early days had solved all doubts whatsoever. There was nothing left to do but to accept their decision as they stood in the pulpit with hand uplifted and told us authoritatively what was God's way. I remember one little girl in our town asked her mother if God boarded at the Rev. Mr. Sheldon's house, and if the Rev. Mr. Sheldon told God what to do.

We are in doubt as to the value of the attitude of the head master in teachers' meetings in laying down the law and declaring all the educational doctrine. If he succeeds in getting others than himself to speak, doubts as to the value of the conference rise within us when we note that he is not getting real opinions, but what the speakers think the master wants to have said, or else, if there happens to be an educational rumpus coming, the opponents are making wild objections in a desire to be different rather than to be right. In either case there is too much personality; it is a plague. I notice that most educational authorities cannot avoid "summing up" after a conference over which they have presided. The sum-up is a temptation which leads many a master into sin, for, in summing up, one always generalizes, and then he settles. That is for the rest of us a cork in the flask of ideas, an admonition, "Go thy ways and think no more."

A practice which hardens the educator in his error is to question him when he has finished a paper or an address. You can feel the certainty in the atmosphere, the condition of one man who knows all the truth being led into generalizations by questioners who often intimate to him that they believe him possessed of power and authority to pronounce final decision upon all unsolved generalities. "I wish I were as sure of anything as Macaulay is of everything."

There are good cures for oracularism common enough. "Mingle with men." But get men that won't feed your vanity as

many do. Fresh out of college I took a trip on a schooner. Tom Doodeney, a sailor, took to me because I was an "educated young man." He brought up some coins that had been found in Roman ruins. I had studied Latin eight years and consequently could tell him nothing of the meaning of the inscriptions. On the same day we were going to rig a platform to hang over the side of the vessel. "I'll splice this end," said Tom, "and you can splice that end." "But I don't know how to splice a rope," said I.

"Well," he retorted, "I don't see what good it did you to go to college; you don't know nothing and you can't do nothing."

But a schoolmaster does not get in his business such tonic rebukes as that. If he is in error, grammatical, historical, social, ethical, none of his daily associates set him right. He whose chief business has been correction gets none. He expects deference to his knowledge and judgment. His growth is impaired. Nobody prunes him.

A schoolmaster could get this benefit from other men in a lodge, a church, or a club, if their notion that he likes to be deferred to did not lead them to continue to feed the very quality in him which needs banting. It seems as though some more effective means of curing the cocksureness of our business needs to be undertaken, such as marrying a strong-minded widow or taking a regular position Saturdays and vacations as a salesman, or going into active politics, or getting friends to write to third parties asking for opinions as to what kind of people we are, or to do something in a regular way which will serve as an antidote to the narrowing effect of our trade. For we are expected to secure a good deal of immediate and unquestioning obedience. Unconsciously we get to expect it not only from children but from adults: teachers, parents, and citizens. Then we grow into the type. There develops a side of our personality that is a plague. I used to feel that a teacher in a school directed by me ought not to engage in any business that would interfere with his teaching. But I have found that those who practice a little law, or follow real estate or something else that puts them into a position of evident superiority to me in their knowledge of men and affairs, make me a less objectionable personality.

*The cure of bossism.*—How to cure my love of command is another practical problem very similar to the one of getting rid of my oracularity. A good way to use teachers' meetings is to get orders transfigured into resolutions, instead of imposing the directions specifically upon the staff. What do you think of beginning farther back and getting the condition which you wish to remedy brought up in such a manner as to make the need of concerted action very evident? Then you can get opinions as to corrective measures expressed with some fulness. I submit for your consideration an example of such action in the case of discipline. This is a measure that came from teachers to the principal, not vice versa.

COURTESY, OBEDIENCE, SELF-CONTROL

1. This is a proposition discussed, formulated, and amended in the Teachers' Councils and recommended to the Principal for trial.

2. Courtesy is so valuable as an asset for success in life that I, a teacher, ought to make it habitual in those under my charge.

3. Silent obedience is a form of courtesy required in business and other organizations, and it is my duty to train this habit.

4. New and substitute teachers should realize that they can have this if they will insist upon it from the first moment and, if failing to get it, will follow this procedure.

5. Select one girl from the group of apparent disturbers; never attempt to cure more than one at a time. Give the scheme a chance to work. Don't talk, don't scold, don't raise your voice. Give her a distinct direction and add "do this silently."

6. If the girl disobeys, send another girl for a hall patrol who will be on that floor or one floor below. The teacher and the hall patrol will then give the girl an opportunity to obey.

7. Hall patrol and teacher fill out a memorandum for record in Bureau of Recommendation: "Smith, Mary, 2B4. Discourteous and disobedient. February 19, 1914. Annie White, teacher. Mary Brown, patrol. Finally obeyed." Patrol files this with the bureau before night.

8. If girls fails, hall patrol will keep her till end of period, giving her an opportunity to add to report: "I regret my disobedience. I intend to follow all directions of Washington Irving teachers without retort or comment. Mary Smith."

9. Remember this is not intended as punishment, but for habit-formation. Don't talk. Don't encourage girl to talk. Treat the case like a doctor, quietly.

10. If the hall patrol cannot reasonably secure this statement, borrow a trustworthy girl from a neighboring room and send the report to the

deputy principal in Room 110. Direct the offending girl to report there immediately.

11. The new or substitute teacher will repeat this over and over as long as the remaining class is not under control. It is not a device aiming at justice or selection of the worst offender or at punishment. It is a demonstration to girls that courtesy and obedience is the inviolable rule.

12. Other teachers should use this plan when they see the need of it. They know the futility of weakening this process by use except in serious cases.

(Approved for trial February 10, 1914.)

Another substitute for the commander-in-chief method of running a school is the extensive use of committees and the frankest abandonment to them of power and responsibility. The best example of successful use of this means known to me is found in the Manual Training High School in Brooklyn. I never saw a school with so large a proportion of teachers able to take up any detail of administration and carry it out so well. The principal once said to me, "The school runs better when I'm gone than when I'm present." That's his joke. But the spirit of the remark shows a notable sanity of judgment as to which is of greater value, a man or a school. That principal prefers teachers in co-operative action instead of in the more primitive condition of soldiers working under orders. It is easier to obey commands than it is to co-operate. The general opinion, as I have found it in the eastern states, is that a directed school is a more perfect organization than a self-directed one. Of course, it all turns on whether you want teachers to be soldiers under a general or to be a republic, with you as their executive officer to carry out resolutions; whether you want to be able to say, "*L'école, c'est moi*," or to admit that the service is so different in complexity and purpose from that of a monarchy that diversity and abundance of thought ought to be desired, looked for, and encouraged.

You may be a follower of Carlyle and hold that progress needs a strong man, a hero, and that in the premises you are it, or you may go to the other extreme of Benson in the *College Window* and exclaim, "Better educational anarchy than this dead maintenance of tradition." You will not lack eminent opinion to support the old view that the masterful personality, the commanding character, the leader, is essential for advance. You can also find much to



make you believe that under the leadership theory the schools have been woefully retarded behind the needs of the times.

*Cure for love of limelight.*—If you ask a number of sensible friends: "What is your idea of the advantage of printing the schoolmaster's portrait in the school publications or in the town newspaper or of putting his name in print?" you may get the same consensus of opinion that I have obtained, to wit: that it is naught. That is, the main purpose in the service into which you have entered is not benefited by these acts. This seems to be the general opinion. The use of these devices is for you, personally, and not for the cause you serve. They do not add glory to the school. On the contrary, it is the importance of the school that gives the portrait its distinction. "All over the country," says Jean Winslow, "schoolmasters are using their schools as billboards to advertise themselves." But even the poorest staff of teachers does something to make a school valuable. There is, therefore, an unearned increment of credit which every schoolmaster gets through the fact of being master. If he capitalizes it for himself he is a grafter. The head of the most noted endowed school in Brooklyn says to the reporter: "I don't want to be mentioned. Speak of the institution all you like, praise it or blame it, but respect the co-operative spirit which we are trying to increase and which you know is the essential excellence all good Americans want fostered. Don't degrade it by ignoring it in favor of the old monarchy or leadership idea. Don't babyfy me by assuming that, whatever I say, I am internally desirous that you advertise me." A man who wishes to mortify his love of limelight can do a good deal of good to his school in teachers' meetings by having always teacher-chairmen and by sitting among the teachers and by keeping as quiet as he knows how. He can keep off the stage in assembly exercises and have all his functions exercised by teachers and children. Everything he knows that ought to be said he can get said by them. It will always in my lifetime be necessary for some one person to address others and to instruct them, but it is not at all necessary or desirable that the prominence of this function should appear in me. By telling one person today, another tomorrow, what effect is desired, I can distribute the practice of direction and diminish the plague of my own conceit.

*Cure of general egotism.*—Obviously, all these individual cures I have suggested are remedies for various manifestations of egotism. Some of the displays are unconscious imitations of acts not intentionally egotistic, but handed down from a time when all forms of efficient organization were monarchical. But it seems recognized that the purpose of education is to mature its beneficiaries, and consequently the qualities that require people to be ruled by a personal monarch are disappearing and the autocrat's characteristics in the schoolmaster are becoming traces of outworn usefulness. We may now have reached that point of educational advance in which the continuance of these manifestations in the master may be real obstacles to the further progress of education itself. Evidently these old practices do foster and increase egotism. Without doubt egotism is the opposite of the spirit of educational service. And for that reason suggestions for the cure of the schoolmaster's egotism are highly proper considerations for an educational association like yours. "I knew he was an educator," says Mr. Shaw, "because he was talking the whole time about himself." This seems as absurd as to say, "I knew he was a teetotaler, for he was describing the taste of cocktails." Egotism in a schoolmaster should seem like vice in a clergyman. For what is systematic education but organized unselfishness? Its whole aim and processes are the assisting, guiding, and training of others. It would not hurt the schoolmaster to blot the personal pronoun out of half of his vocabulary. A man who makes his living on the stage sang for us. One class came into assembly after we was introduced. A girl rose at the close of the concert and said: "Sir, might we ask your name?" "Why, that is no matter," said he, "if you enjoyed the songs; that's what it was for." Yet that man's name was money in pocket for him. What a pity that of the two characters in *The Deserted Village*, the schoolmaster and the minister, it was not our brother professional whose motto was "do good by stealth and blush to find it fame."

The cure for selfishness is obviously the conscious and persistent practice of centering one's mind upon others with intent to see their excellences and to build upon them. Why shall an administrator not try to produce the largest number of teachers who can stand on their own feet, who can go on without direction, who can take the

principal's place, who are even evident suggestions of more administrative ability than he? Why not get the greater motive of public service so devoted as to drown idea of self entirely? This partakes of the nature of religious fervor. But that is what you conceive education to be: not a display, not the business of the pedant, not a machine for a big man to tend, but the manifestation of a tremendous human impulse toward the common good. For "only the spirit can teach"—no self-advertiser, no peddler of his portraits, no boss, no general, no authority, no self-centered man whose appetite is for power and publicity. He is an error, an obstacle, a plague, the heritage of a mistaken past. Forget him.

James B. Angell was for the most of his lifetime the president of the University of Michigan, the first of the great free universities and the mother of the great family of state institutions of higher education. He secured and guided the development of about every sort of improvement that universities have enjoyed in the past fifty years. Every week or two during the past decade some alumnus or other has importuned "Prexy" Angell to write his autobiography. At last the book came out. He called it "Reminiscences." One after another the great achievements of the university are recounted, but in each case it runs something like this: "In 1870 Professors Tyler and Frieze became especially interested in the possibilities of establishing a chair of so and so at Ann Arbor." Then he goes on to describe the success of the movement. The old men know who chiefly interested Professors Tyler and Frieze in the project; the old men know that for everything worth while in the history of the university President Angell was working his best, which was unsurpassed by any other person, but nowhere in his book can you find by claim or by indirection that the author of the book was the instigator and chief agent of the works he describes. Nor ever in the thirty years during which I have heard him deliver addresses or talk to groups or to me have I heard him say, "I did this," or "I did that." His abstinence from doing so marks him as a gentleman. Angell's habit marks him as a strong man conserving his strength for his service. The inevitable effect of one's claiming credit for himself is to alienate support from his cause; Angell's self-silence stamps him as a world-force, for he was more

intent that good should come than that it should be known through whom the good was coming.

On three separate occasions I have watched Wirt, a young man, an educator, a business man, a financier, a social engineer. I have never heard this quiet school man say, "I did this; I did that," but always "our" schools, "our" idea. The book of manners says "mention not yourself." The manners are good in Gary.

So, in conclusion, let us come back to the suggestion with which we began, that the realization of the sense of personal superiority must result in the inferiority of others. It belongs to the childhood of the race and not to a mature civilization. The hero, rejoicing in his prominence, is not a picture for manhood, but a memory of human babydom. The cry, "Lo, I am Ozymandias, let all the world behold me and despair!" is of a piece with the childish boast, "Me heap big injun, me!" You were not born into this world for the lifting-up of one, but of whole companies of men and women. Your daily business thrusts the fact insistently before your face by giving you numbers whose care and training and nurture is your only pre-eminent concern. Its natural successful doing must pull you out and away from primitive and uncivilized ideas. If it is your nature to revert to traditional selfishness, then you must war against nature, lest it hamper and delay the main business of your life and irrevocably make a mess of it altogether. For the whole essence of education, so far as you are employed for it, is other-mindedness. The knowledge that those engaged in it have made in any respect the typical teacher, because of self-conceit, an object of contempt, is for you a vital and impelling thought. The cure is the most simple thing in the world. It involves the control of that which is of all things the most readily controlled by our own wills, to wit, our own thoughts, which we can turn whithersoever we desire—upon ourselves, our elevation, our fame, our glory, or where, in this business it belongs, on "*les autres, là, de bon vouloir servir.*"